

**LONGINUS , LANG ANDREW,
HAVELL HERBERT LORD**

**ON THE
SUBLIME**

Longinus
On the Sublime

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Longinus

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active 1st century Longinus

On the Sublime

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The text which has been followed in the present Translation is that of Jahn (Bonn, 1867), revised by Vahlen, and republished in 1884. In several instances it has been found necessary to diverge from Vahlen's readings, such divergencies being duly pointed out in the Notes.

One word as to the aim and scope of the present Translation. My object throughout has been to make Longinus speak in English, to preserve, as far as lay in my power, the noble fire and lofty tone of the original. How to effect this, without being betrayed into a loose paraphrase, was an exceedingly difficult problem. The style of Longinus is in a high degree original, occasionally running into strange eccentricities of language; and no one who has not made the attempt can realise the difficulty of giving anything like an adequate version of the more elaborate passages. These considerations I submit to those to whom I may seem at first sight to have handled my text too freely.

My best thanks are due to Dr. Butcher, Professor of Greek in the University of Edinburgh, who from first to last has shown a lively interest in the present undertaking which I can never sufficiently acknowledge. He has read the Translation throughout, and acting on his suggestions I have been able in numerous instances to bring my version into a closer conformity with the original.

I have also to acknowledge the kindness of the distinguished writer who has contributed the Introduction, and who, in spite of the heavy demands on his time, has lent his powerful support to help on the work of one who was personally unknown to him.

In conclusion, I may be allowed to express a hope that the present attempt may contribute something to reawaken an interest in an unjustly neglected classic.

ANALYSIS

The Treatise on the Sublime may be divided into six Parts, as follows: —

I. – cc. i, ii. The Work of Caecilius. Definition of the Sublime. Whether Sublimity falls within the rules of Art.

II. – cc. iii-v. [The beginning lost.] Vices of Style opposed to the Sublime: Affectation, Bombast, False Sentiment, Frigid Conceits. The cause of such defects.

III. – cc. vi, vii. The true Sublime, what it is, and how distinguishable.

IV. – cc. viii-xl. Five Sources of the Sublime (how Sublimity is related to Passion, c. viii, §§ 2-4).

(i.) Grandeur of Thought, cc. ix-xv.

a. As the natural outcome of nobility of soul. Examples (c ix).

b. Choice of the most striking circumstances. Sappho's Ode (c. x).

c. Amplification. Plato compared with Demosthenes, Demosthenes with Cicero (cc. xi-xiii).

d. Imitation (cc. xiii, xiv).

e. Imagery (c. xv).

(ii.) Power of moving the Passions (omitted here, because dealt with in a separate work).

(iii.) Figures of Speech (cc. xvi-xxix).

a. The Figure of Adjuration (c. xvi). The Art to conceal Art (c. xvii).

b. Rhetorical Question (c. xviii).

c. Asyndeton (c. xix-xxi).

d. Hyperbaton (c. xxii).

e. Changes of Number, Person, Tense, etc. (cc. xxiii-xxvii).

f. Periphrasis (cc. xxviii, xxix).

(iv.) Graceful Expression (cc. xxx-xxxii and xxxvii, xxxviii).

a. Choice of Words (c. xxx).

b. Ornaments of Style (cc. xxxi, xxxii and xxxvii, xxxviii).

(α) On the use of Familiar Words (c. xxxi).

(β) Metaphors; accumulated; extract from the *Timaeus*; abuse of Metaphors; certain tasteless conceits blamed in Plato (c. xxxii).

[Hence arises a digression (cc. xxxiii-xxxvi) on the spirit in which we should judge of the faults of great authors. Demosthenes compared with Hyperides, Lysias with Plato. Sublimity, however far from faultless, to be always preferred to a tame correctness.]

(γ) Comparisons and Similes [lost] (c. xxxvii).

(δ) Hyperbole (c. xxxviii).

(v.) Dignity and Elevation of Structure (cc. xxxix, xl).

a. Modulation of Syllables (c. xxxix).

b. Composition (c. xl).

V. – cc. xli-xliii. Vices of Style destructive to Sublimity.

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| (i.) Abuse of Rhythm | |
| (ii.) Broken and Jerky Clauses | (cc. xli, xlii). |
| (iii.) Undue Prolixity | |

(iv.) Improper Use of Familiar Words. Anti-climax. Example from Theopompus (c. xliii).

VI. – Why this age is so barren of great authors – whether the cause is to be sought in a despotic form of government, or, as Longinus rather thinks, in the prevailing corruption of manners, and in the sordid and paltry views of life which almost universally prevail (c. xliv).

INTRODUCTION

TREATISE ON THE SUBLIME

Boileau, in his introduction to his version of the ancient Treatise on the Sublime, says that he is making no valueless present to his age. Not valueless, to a generation which talks much about style and method in literature, should be this new rendering of the noble fragment, long attributed to Longinus, the Greek tutor and political adviser of Zenobia. There is, indeed, a modern English version by Spurden,¹ but that is now rare, and seldom comes into the market. Rare, too, is Vaucher's critical essay (1854), which is unlucky, as the French and English books both contain valuable disquisitions on the age of the author of the Treatise. This excellent work has had curious fortunes. It is never quoted nor referred to by any extant classical writer, and, among the many books attributed by Suidas to Longinus, it is not mentioned. Decidedly the old world has left no more noble relic of criticism. Yet the date of the book is obscure, and it did not come into the hands of the learned in modern Europe till Robertelli and Manutius each published editions in 1544. From that time the Treatise has often been printed, edited, translated; but opinion still floats undecided about its origin and period. Does it belong to the age of Augustus, or to the age of Aurelian? Is the author the historical Longinus – the friend of Plotinus, the tutor of Porphyry, the victim of Aurelian, – or have we here a work by an unknown hand more than two centuries earlier? Manuscripts and traditions are here of little service. The oldest manuscript, that of Paris, is regarded as the parent of the rest. It is a small quarto of 414 pages, whereof 335 are occupied by the “Problems” of Aristotle. Several leaves have been lost, hence the fragmentary character of the essay. The Paris MS. has an index, first mentioning the “Problems,” and then ΔΙΟΝΥΣΙΟΥ Η ΛΟΓΓΙΝΟΥ ΠΕΡΙ ΥΨΟΥΣ, that is, “The work of Dionysius, or of Longinus, about the Sublime.”

On this showing the transcriber of the MS. considered its authorship dubious. Supposing that the author was Dionysius, which of the many writers of that name was he? Again, if he was Longinus, how far does his work tally with the characteristics ascribed to that late critic, and peculiar to his age?

About this Longinus, while much is written, little is certainly known. Was he a descendant of a freedman of one of the Cassii Longini, or of an eastern family with a mixture of Greek and Roman blood? The author of the Treatise avows himself a Greek, and apologises, as a Greek, for attempting an estimate of Cicero. Longinus himself was the nephew and heir of Fronto, a Syrian rhetorician of Emesa. Whether Longinus was born there or not, and when he was born, are things uncertain. Porphyry, born in 233 A.D., was his pupil: granting that Longinus was twenty years Porphyry's senior, he must have come into the world about 213 A.D. He travelled much, studied in many cities, and was the friend of the mystic Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Ammonius. The former called him “a philologist, not a philosopher.” Porphyry shows us Longinus at a supper where the plagiarisms of Greek writers are discussed – a topic dear to trivial or spiteful mediocrity. He is best known by his death. As the Greek secretary of Zenobia he inspired a haughty answer from the queen to Aurelian, who therefore put him to death. Many rhetorical and philosophic treatises are ascribed to him, whereof only fragments survive. Did he write the Treatise on the Sublime? Modern students prefer to believe that the famous essay is, if not by Plutarch, as some hold, at least by some author of his age, the age of the early Caesars.

The arguments for depriving Longinus, Zenobia's tutor, of the credit of the Treatise lie on the surface, and may be briefly stated. He addresses his work as a letter to a friend, probably a

¹ Longmans, London, 1836.

Roman pupil, Terentianus, with whom he has been reading a work on the Sublime by Caecilius. Now Caecilius, a voluminous critic, certainly lived not later than Plutarch, who speaks of him with a sneer. It is unlikely then that an author, two centuries later, would make the old book of Caecilius the starting-point of his own. He would probably have selected some recent or even contemporary rhetorician. Once more, the writer of the Treatise of the Sublime quotes no authors later than the Augustan period. Had he lived as late as the historical Longinus he would surely have sought examples of bad style, if not of good, from the works of the Silver Age. Perhaps he would hardly have resisted the malicious pleasure of censuring the failures among whom he lived. On the other hand, if he cites no late author, no classical author cites him, in spite of the excellence of his book. But we can hardly draw the inference that he was of late date from this purely negative evidence.

Again, he describes, in a very interesting and earnest manner, the characteristics of his own period (Translation, pp. 82-86). Why, he is asked, has genius become so rare? There are many clever men, but scarce any highly exalted and wide-reaching genius. Has eloquence died with liberty? "We have learned the lesson of a benignant despotism, and have never tasted freedom." The author answers that it is easy and characteristic of men to blame the present times. Genius may have been corrupted, not by a world-wide peace, but by love of gain and pleasure, passions so strong that "I fear, for such men as we are it is better to serve than to be free. If our appetites were let loose altogether against our neighbours, they would be like wild beasts uncaged, and bring a deluge of calamity on the whole civilised world." Melancholy words, and appropriate to our own age, when cleverness is almost universal, and genius rare indeed, and the choice between liberty and servitude hard to make, were the choice within our power.

But these words assuredly apply closely to the peaceful period of Augustus, when Virgil and Horace "praising their tyrant sang," not to the confused age of the historical Longinus. Much has been said of the allusion to "the Lawgiver of the Jews" as "no ordinary person," but that remark might have been made by a heathen acquainted with the Septuagint, at either of the disputed dates. On the other hand, our author (Section XIII) quotes the critical ideas of "Ammonius and his school," as to the debt of Plato to Homer. Now the historical Longinus was a friend of the Neoplatonist teacher (not writer), Ammonius Saccas. If we could be sure that the Ammonius of the Treatise was this Ammonius, the question would be settled in favour of the late date. Our author would be that Longinus who inspired Zenobia to resist Aurelian, and who perished under his revenge. But Ammonius is not a very uncommon name, and we have no reason to suppose that the Neoplatonist Ammonius busied himself with the literary criticism of Homer and Plato. There was, among others, an Egyptian Ammonius, the tutor of Plutarch.

These are the mass of the arguments on both sides. M. Egger sums them up thus: "After carefully examining the tradition of the MSS., and the one very late testimony in favour of Longinus, I hesitated for long as to the date of this precious work. In 1854 M. Vaucher² inclined me to believe that Plutarch was the author.³ All seems to concur towards the opinion that, if not Plutarch, at least one of his contemporaries wrote the most original Greek essay in its kind since the *Rhetoric* and *Poetic* of Aristotle."⁴

We may, on the whole, agree that the nobility of the author's thought, his habit of quoting nothing more recent than the Augustan age, and his description of his own time, which seems so pertinent to that epoch, mark him as its child rather than as a great critic lost among the *somnia Pythagorea* of the Neoplatonists. On the other hand, if the author be a man of high heart and courage, as he seems, so was that martyr of independence, Longinus. Not without scruple, then, can we deprive Zenobia's tutor of the glory attached so long to his name.

² *Etude Critique sur la traité du Sublime et les écrits de Longin*. Geneva.

³ See also M. Naudet, *Journal des Savants*, Mars 1838, and M. Egger, in the same Journal, May 1884.

⁴ Egger, *Histoire de la Critique chez les Grecs*, p. 426. Paris, 1887.

Whatever its date, and whoever its author may be, the Treatise is fragmentary. The lost parts may very probably contain the secret of its period and authorship. The writer, at the request of his friend, Terentianus, and dissatisfied with the essay of Caecilius, sets about examining the nature of the Sublime in poetry and oratory. To the latter he assigns, as is natural, much more literary importance than we do, in an age when there is so little oratory of literary merit, and so much popular rant. The subject of sublimity must naturally have attracted a writer whose own moral nature was pure and lofty, who was inclined to discover in moral qualities the true foundation of the highest literary merit. Even in his opening words he strikes the keynote of his own disposition, where he approves the saying that “the points in which we resemble the divine nature are benevolence and love of truth.” Earlier or later born, he must have lived in the midst of literary activity, curious, eager, occupied with petty questions and petty quarrels, concerned, as men in the best times are not very greatly concerned, with questions of technique and detail. Cut off from politics, people found in composition a field for their activity. We can readily fancy what literature becomes when not only its born children, but the minor busybodies whose natural place is politics, excluded from these, pour into the study of letters. Love of notoriety, vague activity, fantastic indolence, we may be sure, were working their will in the sacred close of the Muses. There were literary sets, jealousies, recitations of new poems; there was a world of amateurs, if there were no papers and paragraphs. To this world the author speaks like a voice from the older and graver age of Greece. If he lived late, we can imagine that he did not quote contemporaries, not because he did not know them, but because he estimated them correctly. He may have suffered, as we suffer, from critics who, of all the world’s literature, know only “the last thing out,” and who take that as a standard for the past, to them unfamiliar, and for the hidden future. As we are told that excellence is not of the great past, but of the present, not in the classical masters, but in modern Muscovites, Portuguese, or American young women, so the author of the Treatise may have been troubled by Asiatic eloquence, now long forgotten, by names of which not a shadow survives. He, on the other hand, has a right to be heard because he has practised a long familiarity with what is old and good. His mind has ever been in contact with masterpieces, as the mind of a critic should be, as the mind of a reviewer seldom is, for the reviewer has to hurry up and down inspecting new literary adventurers. Not among their experiments will he find a touchstone of excellence, a test of greatness, and that test will seldom be applied to contemporary performances. What is the test, after all, of the Sublime, by which our author means the truly great, the best and most passionate thoughts, nature’s high and rare inspirations, expressed in the best chosen words? He replies that “a just judgment of style is the final fruit of long experience.” “Much has he travelled in the realms of gold.”

The word “style” has become a weariness to think upon; so much is said, so much is printed about the art of expression, about methods, tricks, and turns; so many people, without any long experience, set up to be judges of style, on the strength of having admired two or three modern and often rather fantastic writers. About our author, however, we know that his experience has been long, and of the best, that he does not speak from a hasty acquaintance with a few contemporary *précieux* and *précieuses*. The bad writing of his time he traces, as much of our own may be traced, to “the pursuit of novelty in thought,” or rather in expression. “It is this that has turned the brain of nearly all our learned world to-day.” “Gardons nous d’écrire trop bien,” he might have said, “c’est la pire manière qu’il y’ait d’écrire.”⁵

The Sublime, with which he concerns himself, is “a certain loftiness and excellence of language,” which “takes the reader out of himself... The Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no.” In its own sphere the Sublime does what “natural magic” does in the poetical rendering of nature, and perhaps in the same scarcely-to-be-analysed fashion. Whether this art can be taught or not is a question which the author treats with modesty. Then, as now, people were denying (and not unjustly) that this art can be taught by rule.

⁵ M. Anatole France.

The author does not go so far as to say that Criticism, “unlike Justice, does little evil, and little good; that is, *if* to entertain for a moment delicate and curious minds is to do little good.” He does not rate his business so low as that. He admits that the inspiration comes from genius, from nature. But “an author can only learn from art when he is to abandon himself to the direction of his genius.” Nature must “burst out with a kind of fine madness and divine inspiration.” The madness must be *fine*. How can art aid it to this end? By knowledge of, by sympathy and emulation with, “the great poets and prose writers of the past.” By these we may be inspired, as the Pythoness by Apollo. From the genius of the past “an effluence breathes upon us.” The writer is not to imitate, but to keep before him the perfection of what has been done by the greatest poets. He is to look on them as beacons; he is to keep them as exemplars or ideals. He is to place them as judges of his work. “How would Homer, how would Demosthenes, have been affected by what I have written?” This is practical counsel, and even the most florid modern author, after polishing a paragraph, may tear it up when he has asked himself, “What would Addison have said about this eloquence of mine, or Sainte Beuve, or Mr. Matthew Arnold?” In this way what we call inspiration, that is the performance of the heated mind, perhaps working at its best, perhaps overstraining itself, and overstating its idea, might really be regulated. But they are few who consider so closely, fewer perhaps they who have the heart to cut out their own fine or refined things. Again, our author suggests another criterion. We are, as in Lamb’s phrase, “to write for antiquity,” with the souls of poets dead and gone for our judges. But we are also to write for the future, asking with what feelings posterity will read us – if it reads us at all. This is a good discipline. We know by practice what will hit some contemporary tastes; we know the measure of smartness, say, or the delicate flippancy, or the sentence with “a dying fall.” But one should also know that these are fancies of the hour – these and the touch of archaism, and the spinster-like and artificial precision, which seem to be points in some styles of the moment. Such reflections as our author bids us make, with a little self-respect added, may render our work less popular and effective, and certainly are not likely to carry it down to remote posterity. But all such reflections, and action in accordance with what they teach, are elements of literary self-respect. It is hard to be conscientious, especially hard for him who writes much, and of necessity, and for bread. But conscience is never to be obeyed with ease, though the ease grows with the obedience. The book attributed to Longinus will not have missed its mark if it reminds us that, in literature at least, for conscience there is yet a place, possibly even a reward, though that is unessential. By virtue of reasonings like these, and by insisting that nobility of style is, as it were, the bloom on nobility of soul, the Treatise on the Sublime becomes a tonic work, wholesome to be read by young authors and old. “It is natural in us to feel our souls lifted up by the true Sublime, and, conceiving a sort of generous exultation, to be filled with joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read.” Here speaks his natural disinterested greatness the author himself is here sublime, and teaches by example as well as precept, for few things are purer than a pure and ardent admiration. The critic is even confident enough to expect to find his own nobility in others, believing that what is truly Sublime “will always please, and please all readers.” And in this universal acceptance by the populace and the literate, by critics and creators, by young and old, he finds the true external canon of sublimity. The verdict lies not with contemporaries, but with the large public, not with the little set of dilettanti, but must be spoken by all. Such verdicts assign the crown to Shakespeare and Molière, to Homer and Cervantes; we should not clamorously anticipate this favourable judgment for Bryant or Emerson, nor for the greatest of our own contemporaries. Boileau so much misconceived these lofty ideas that he regarded “Longinus’s” judgment as solely that “of good sense,” and held that, in his time, “nothing was good or bad till he had spoken.” But there is far more than good sense, there is high poetic imagination and moral greatness, in the criticism of our author, who certainly would have rejected Boileau’s compliment when he selects Longinus as a literary dictator.

Indeed we almost grudge our author’s choice of a subject. He who wrote that “it was not in nature’s plan for us, her children, to be base and ignoble; no, she brought us into life as into some

great field of contest,” should have had another field of contest than literary criticism. It is almost a pity that we have to doubt the tradition, according to which our author was Longinus, and, being but a rhetorician, greatly dared and bravely died. Taking literature for his theme, he wanders away into grammar, into considerations of tropes and figures, plurals and singulars, trumpery mechanical pedantries, as we think now, to whom grammar is no longer, as of old, “a new invented game.” Moreover, he has to give examples of the faults opposed to sublimity, he has to dive into and search the bathos, to dally over examples of the bombastic, the over-wrought, the puerile. These faults are not the sins of “minds generous and aspiring,” and we have them with us always. The additions to Boileau’s preface (Paris, 1772) contain abundance of examples of faults from Voiture, Mascaron, Bossuet, selected by M. de St. Marc, who no doubt found abundance of entertainment in the chastising of these obvious affectations. It hardly seems the proper work for an author like him who wrote the Treatise on the Sublime. But it is tempting, even now, to give contemporary instances of skill in the Art of Sinking – modern cases of bombast, triviality, false rhetoric. “Speaking generally, it would seem that bombast is one of the hardest things to avoid in writing,” says an author who himself avoids it so well. Bombast is the voice of sham passion, the shadow of an insincere attitude. “Even the wretched phantom who still bore the imperial title stooped to pay this ignominious blackmail,” cries bombast in Macaulay’s *Lord Clive*. The picture of a phantom who is not only a phantom but wretched, stooping to pay blackmail which is not only blackmail but ignominious, may divert the reader and remind him that the faults of the past are the faults of the present. Again, “The desolate islands along the sea-coast, overgrown by noxious vegetation, and swarming with deer and tigers” – do, what does any one suppose, perform what forlorn part in the economy of the world? Why, they “supply the cultivated districts with abundance of salt.” It is as comic as —

“And thou Dalhousie, thou great God of War,
Lieutenant-Colonel to the Earl of Mar.”

Bombast “transcends the Sublime,” and falls on the other side. Our author gives more examples of puerility. “Slips of this sort are made by those who, aiming at brilliancy, polish, and especially attractiveness, are landed in paltriness and silly affectation.” Some modern instances we had chosen; the field of choice is large and richly fertile in those blossoms. But the reader may be left to twine a garland of them for himself; to select from contemporaries were invidious, and might provoke retaliation. When our author censures Timaeus for saying that Alexander took less time to annex Asia than Isocrates spent in writing an oration, to bid the Greeks attack Persia, we know what he would have thought of Macaulay’s antithesis. He blames Xenophon for a poor pun, and Plato, less justly, for mere figurative badinage. It would be an easy task to ransack contemporaries, even great contemporaries, for similar failings, for pomposity, for the florid, for sentences like processions of intoxicated torch-bearers, for pedantic display of cheap erudition, for misplaced flippancy, for nice derangement of epitaphs wherein no adjective is used which is appropriate. With a library of cultivated American novelists and uncultivated English romancers at hand, with our own voluminous essays, and the essays and histories and “art criticisms” of our neighbours to draw from, no student need lack examples of what is wrong. He who writes, reflecting on his own innumerable sins, can but beat his breast, cry *Mea Culpa*, and resist the temptation to beat the breasts of his coevals. There are not many authors, there have never been many, who did not need to turn over the treatise of the Sublime by day and night.⁶

As a literary critic of Homer our author is most interesting even in his errors. He compares the poet of the *Odyssey* to the sunset: the *Iliad* is noonday work, the *Odyssey* is touched with the

⁶ The examples of bombast used to be drawn as late as Spurden’s translation (1836), from Lee, from *Troilus and Cressida*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Cowley and Crashaw furnished instances of conceits; Waller, Young, and Hayley of frigidity; and Darwin of affectation. “What beaux and beauties crowd the gaudy groves, And woo and win their vegetable loves” — a phrase adopted — “vapid vegetable loves” — by the Laureate in “The Talking Oak.”

glow of evening – the softness and the shadows. “Old age naturally leans,” like childhood, “towards the fabulous.” The tide has flowed back, and left dim bulks of things on the long shadowy sands. Yet he makes an exception, oddly enough, in favour of the story of the Cyclops, which really is the most fabulous and crude of the fairy tales in the first and greatest of romances. The Slaying of the Wooers, that admirable fight, worthy of a saga, he thinks too improbable, and one of the “trifles into which second childhood is apt to be betrayed.” He fancies that the aged Homer had “lost his power of depicting the passions”; in fact, he is hardly a competent or sympathetic critic of the *Odyssey*. Perhaps he had lived among Romans till he lost his sense of humour; perhaps he never had any to lose. On the other hand, he preserved for us that inestimable and not to be translated fragment of Sappho – φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν.

It is curious to find him contrasting Apollonius Rhodius as faultless, with Homer as great but faulty. The “faultlessness” of Apollonius is not his merit, for he is often tedious, and he has little skill in selection; moreover, he is deliberately antiquarian, if not pedantic. His true merit is in his original and, as we think, modern telling of a love tale – pure, passionate, and tender, the first in known literature. Medea is often sublime, and always touching. But it is not on these merits that our author lingers; he loves only the highest literature, and, though he finds spots on the sun and faults in Homer, he condones them as oversights passed in the poet’s “contempt of little things.”

Such for us to-day are the lessons of Longinus. He traces dignity and fire of style to dignity and fire of soul. He detects and denounces the very faults of which, in each other, all writers are conscious, and which he brings home to ourselves. He proclaims the essential merits of conviction, and of selection. He sets before us the noblest examples of the past, most welcome in a straining age which tries already to live in the future. He admonishes and he inspires. He knows the “marvellous power and enthralling charm of appropriate and striking words” without dropping into mere word-tasting. “Beautiful words are the very light of thought,” he says, but does not maunder about the “colour” of words, in the style of the decadence. And then he “leaves this generation to its fate,” and calmly turns himself to the work that lies nearest his hand.

To us he is as much a moral as a literary teacher. We admire that Roman greatness of soul in a Greek, and the character of this unknown man, who carried the soul of a poet, the heart of a hero under the gown of a professor. He was one of those whom books cannot debilitate, nor a life of study incapacitate for the study of life.

A. L.

I

1 The treatise of Caecilius on the Sublime, when, as you remember, my dear Terentian, we examined it together, seemed to us to be beneath the dignity of the whole subject, to fail entirely in seizing the salient points, and to offer little profit (which should be the principal aim of every writer) for the trouble of its perusal. There are two things essential to a technical treatise: the first is to define the subject; the second (I mean second in order, as it is by much the first in importance) to point out how and by what methods we may become masters of it ourselves. And yet Caecilius, while wasting his efforts in a thousand illustrations of the nature of the Sublime, as though here we were quite in the dark, somehow passes by as immaterial the question how we might be able to exalt our own genius to a certain degree of progress in sublimity. However, perhaps it would be fairer to commend this **2** writer's intelligence and zeal in themselves, instead of blaming him for his omissions. And since you have bidden me also to put together, if only for your entertainment, a few notes on the subject of the Sublime, let me see if there is anything in my speculations which promises advantage to men of affairs. In you, dear friend – such is my confidence in your abilities, and such the part which becomes you – I look for a sympathising and discerning⁷ critic of the several parts of my treatise. For that was a just remark of his who pronounced that the points in which we resemble the divine nature are benevolence and love of truth.

3 As I am addressing a person so accomplished in literature, I need only state, without enlarging further on the matter, that the Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language, and that it is by this, and this only, that the greatest poets and prose-writers have gained eminence, and won themselves a lasting place in the Temple of Fame. **4** A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no. Skill in invention, lucid arrangement and disposition of facts, are appreciated not by one passage, or by two, but gradually manifest themselves in the general structure of a work; but a sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines⁸ an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash, and exhibits the whole power of the orator in a moment of time. Your own experience, I am sure, my dearest Terentian, would enable you to illustrate these and similar points of doctrine.

⁷ Reading φιλοφρονέστατα και ἀληθέστατα.

⁸ Reading διεφώτισεν.

II

The first question which presents itself for solution is whether there is any art which can teach sublimity or loftiness in writing. For some hold generally that there is mere delusion in attempting to reduce such subjects to technical rules. “The Sublime,” they tell us, “is born in a man, and not to be acquired by instruction; genius is the only master who can teach it. The vigorous products of nature” (such is their view) “are weakened and in every respect debased, when robbed of their flesh and blood by frigid technicalities.” **2** But I maintain that the truth can be shown to stand otherwise in this matter. Let us look at the case in this way; Nature in her loftier and more passionate moods, while detesting all appearance of restraint, is not wont to show herself utterly wayward and reckless; and though in all cases the vital informing principle is derived from her, yet to determine the right degree and the right moment, and to contribute the precision of practice and experience, is the peculiar province of scientific method. The great passions, when left to their own blind and rash impulses without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship let drive at random without ballast. Often they need the spur, but sometimes also the curb. **3** The remark of Demosthenes with regard to human life in general, – that the greatest of all blessings is to be fortunate, but next to that and equal in importance is to be well advised, – for good fortune is utterly ruined by the absence of good counsel, – may be applied to literature, if we substitute genius for fortune, and art for counsel. Then, again (and this is the most important point of all), a writer can only learn from art when he is to abandon himself to the direction of his genius.⁹

These are the considerations which I submit to the unfavourable critic of such useful studies. Perhaps they may induce him to alter his opinion as to the vanity and idleness of our present investigations.

⁹ Literally, “But the most important point of all is that the actual fact that there are some parts of literature which are in the power of natural genius alone, must be learnt from no other source than from art.”

III

... “And let them check the stove’s long tongues of fire:
For if I see one tenant of the hearth,
I’ll thrust within one curling torrent flame,
And bring that roof in ashes to the ground:
But now not yet is sung my noble lay.”¹⁰

Such phrases cease to be tragic, and become burlesque, – I mean phrases like “curling torrent flames” and “vomiting to heaven,” and representing Boreas as a piper, and so on. Such expressions, and such images, produce an effect of confusion and obscurity, not of energy; and if each separately be examined under the light of criticism, what seemed terrible gradually sinks into absurdity. Since then, even in tragedy, where the natural dignity of the subject makes a swelling diction allowable, we cannot pardon a tasteless grandiloquence, how much more incongruous must it seem in sober prose! **2** Hence we laugh at those fine words of Gorgias of Leontini, such as “Xerxes the Persian Zeus” and “vultures, those living tombs,” and at certain conceits of Callisthenes which are high-flown rather than sublime, and at some in Cleitarchus more ludicrous still – a writer whose frothy style tempts us to travesty Sophocles and say, “He blows a little pipe, and blows it ill.” The same faults may be observed in Amphicrates and Hegesias and Matris, who in their frequent moments (as they think) of inspiration, instead of playing the genius are simply playing the fool.

3 Speaking generally, it would seem that bombast is one of the hardest things to avoid in writing. For all those writers who are ambitious of a lofty style, through dread of being convicted of feebleness and poverty of language, slide by a natural gradation into the opposite extreme. “Who fails in great endeavour, nobly fails,” is their creed. **4** Now bulk, when hollow and affected, is always objectionable, whether in material bodies or in writings, and in danger of producing on us an impression of littleness: “nothing,” it is said, “is drier than a man with the dropsy.”

The characteristic, then, of bombast is that it transcends the Sublime: but there is another fault diametrically opposed to grandeur: this is called puerility, and it is the failing of feeble and narrow minds, – indeed, the most ignoble of all vices in writing. By puerility we mean a pedantic habit of mind, which by over-elaboration ends in frigidity. Slips of this sort are made by those who, aiming at brilliancy, polish, and especially attractiveness, are landed in paltriness and silly affectation. **5** Closely associated with this is a third sort of vice, in dealing with the passions, which Theodorus used to call false sentiment, meaning by that an ill-timed and empty display of emotion, where no emotion is called for, or of greater emotion than the situation warrants. Thus we often see an author hurried by the tumult of his mind into tedious displays of mere personal feeling which has no connection with the subject. Yet how justly ridiculous must an author appear, whose most violent transports leave his readers quite cold! However, I will dismiss this subject, as I intend to devote a separate work to the treatment of the pathetic in writing.

¹⁰ Aeschylus in his lost *Oreithyia*.

IV

The last of the faults which I mentioned is frequently observed in Timaeus – I mean the fault of frigidity. In other respects he is an able writer, and sometimes not unsuccessful in the loftier style; a man of wide knowledge, and full of ingenuity; a most bitter critic of the failings of others – but unhappily blind to his own. In his eagerness to be always striking out new thoughts he frequently falls into the most childish absurdities. **2** I will only instance one or two passages, as most of them have been pointed out by Caecilius. Wishing to say something very fine about Alexander the Great he speaks of him as a man “who annexed the whole of Asia in fewer years than Isocrates spent in writing his panegyric oration in which he urges the Greeks to make war on Persia.” How strange is the comparison of the “great Emathian conqueror” with an Athenian rhetorician! By this mode of reasoning it is plain that the Spartans were very inferior to Isocrates in courage, since it took them thirty years to conquer Messene, while he finished the composition of this harangue in ten. **3** Observe, too, his language on the Athenians taken in Sicily. “They paid the penalty for their impious outrage on Hermes in mutilating his statues; and the chief agent in their destruction was one who was descended on his father’s side from the injured deity – Hermocrates, son of Hermon.” I wonder, my dearest Terentian, how he omitted to say of the tyrant Dionysius that for his impiety towards Zeus and Herakles he was deprived of his power by Dion and Herakleides. **4** Yet why speak of Timaeus, when even men like Xenophon and Plato – the very demi-gods of literature – though they had sat at the feet of Socrates, sometimes forgot themselves in the pursuit of such paltry conceits. The former, in his account of the Spartan Polity, has these words: “Their voice you would no more hear than if they were of marble, their gaze is as immovable as if they were cast in bronze; you would deem them more modest than the very maidens in their eyes.”¹¹ To speak of the pupils of the eye as “modest maidens” was a piece of absurdity becoming Amphicrates¹² rather than Xenophon. And then what a strange delusion to suppose that modesty is always without exception expressed in the eye! whereas it is commonly said that there is nothing by which an impudent fellow betrays his character so much as by the expression of his eyes. Thus Achilles addresses Agamemnon in the *Iliad* as “drunkard, with eye of dog.”¹³ **5** Timaeus, however, with that want of judgment which characterises plagiarists, could not leave to Xenophon the possession of even this piece of frigidity. In relating how Agathocles carried off his cousin, who was wedded to another man, from the festival of the unveiling, he asks, “Who could have done such a deed, unless he had harlots instead of maidens in his eyes?” **6** And Plato himself, elsewhere so supreme a master of style, meaning to describe certain recording tablets, says, “They shall write, and deposit in the temples memorials of cypress wood”;¹⁴ and again, “Then concerning walls, Megillus, I give my vote with Sparta that we should let them lie asleep within the ground, and not awaken them.”¹⁵ **7** And Herodotus falls pretty much under the same censure, when he speaks of beautiful women as “tortures to the eye,”¹⁶ though here there is some excuse, as the speakers in this passage are drunken barbarians. Still, even from dramatic motives, such errors in taste should not be permitted to deface the pages of an immortal work.

¹¹ *Xen. de Rep. Laced.* 3, 5.

¹² *C.* iii. sect. 2.

¹³ *Il.* i. 225.

¹⁴ *Plat. de Legg.* v. 741, C.

¹⁵ *Ib.* vi. 778, D.

¹⁶ v. 18.

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